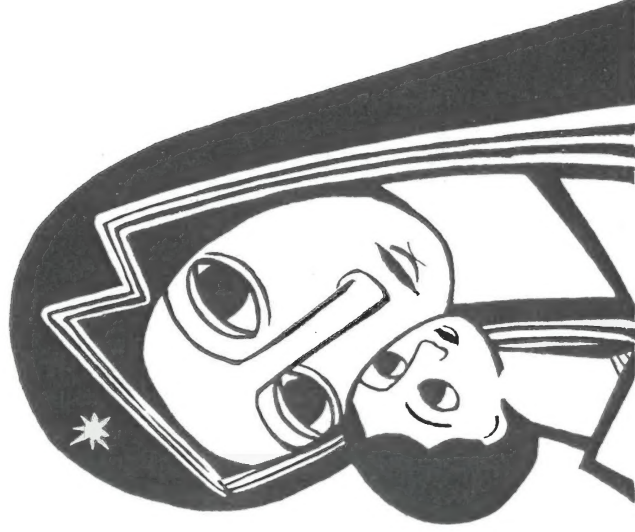


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REST AND LIGHT PERPETUAL: PRAYER FOR THE DEPARTED IN THE COMMUNION OF SAINTS

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The Ecumenical Society of the Blessed Virgin Mary

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Rest and Light Perpetual Prayer for the Departed in the Communion of Saints

by David M. Chapman

Toward the end of the burial office in the first Book of Common Prayer of 1549 we find this majestic collect:

O Lord, with whom do live the spirits of them that be dead: and in whom the souls of them that be elected, after they be delivered from the burden of the flesh, be in joy and felicity: Grant unto this thy servant, that the sins which he committed in this world be not imputed unto him, but that he, escaping the gates of hell, and pains of eternal darkness: may ever dwell in the region of light, with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, in the place where there is no weeping, sorrow, nor heaviness: and when that dreadful day of the general resurrection shall come, make him to rise also with the just and righteous, and receive this body again to glory, then made pure and incorruptible; set him on the right hand of thy Son Jesus Christ, among thy holy and elect, that then he may hear with them these most sweet and comfortable words: Come to me ye blessed of my Father, possess the kingdom which hath been prepared for you from the beginning of the world: Grant this we beseech thee, O merciful Father: through Jesus Christ our mediator and redeemer.

- beautiful words, and grist to the mill of the Prayer Book Society. And yet their currency was short-lived. In the revised burial office of the second Book of Common Prayer of 1552 we find such drastic alterations to the Collect as to render it scarcely recognizable as the same prayer. All reference to intercessory prayer for the soul of the departed is carefully avoided in preference for prayer on behalf of the living. Similarly, the earlier direct commendation of the soul of the departed to God's mercy is replaced

with an indirect formula that is doubtless familiar to many of us: 'Forasmuch as it hath pleased almighty God of his great mercy to take unto himself the soul of our dear brother here departed ...' Thus, over a period of barely three years, a complete sea-change took place in the Church of England toward the practice of praying for those who have died in Christ.

Responsibility for this sudden and complete turnabout lies with the Reformers, and Martin Bucer in particular, who wrote:

I know that this custom of praying for the pious dead is most ancient but, as it is our duty to prefer the divine to all human authority and since Scripture nowhere teaches us by word or example to pray for the departed ... I wish that this commendation of the dead and prayer for them be omitted.¹

And, apart from the reversion to the Sarum Rite during Mary's reign, for the next three hundred years or so, it seemed that Bucer had pronounced the last word on the subject so far as the Church of England was concerned. As a result, prayer for the Christian dead languished along with other customs considered to stem from what Article XXII of the Church of England refers to as 'Romish doctrines ... vainly invented and grounded upon no warranty of Scripture, but rather repugnant to the Word of God'.

Reflecting an independent spirit not unknown in Anglicanism, there have been down the ages determined attempts in some circles at least to retain the traditional practice. Support sometimes emerges from unexpected quarters. Writing from a Methodist perspective, it is interesting to note John Wesley's attitude toward prayer for the departed. Notwithstanding his criticisms of certain aspects of Roman doctrine (as he understood it), Wesley displays a good deal of sympathy with traditional catholic teaching on the present subject. In fact, Wesley goes so far as to commend prayer for the departed, and would appear himself to have practised what he calls 'this kind of general prayer for the faithful departed'.² In his *Collection of Forms of Prayer for Every Day of the Week* (1740) Wesley includes the following prayer for Saturday evening which he attributes to the ancient Liturgy of St Mark:

O Lord, thou God of spirits and of all flesh, be mindful of thy faithful from Abel the just even unto this day. Grant them to rest in the region of the living, in thy kingdom, in the delights of paradise, where there is no grief, sorrow or sighing, where the light of thy countenance perpetually shines. And for thy Son's sake give them and us, in thy due time, a happy resurrection, and a glorious rest at thy right hand for evermore.

With the encouragement and example of influential figures who possessed what Wesley called 'the Catholic spirit', prayer for the departed never totally lapsed in Anglicanism. Indeed, from about the middle of the nineteenth century, prayers for the Christian dead have been adopted more widely in the Church of England, albeit tentatively and not without opposition from Evangelicals mindful of Bucer's vehement rejection of the practice. Presently, prayers for the departed can be found in the *Alternative Service Book 1980*, and also, in slightly veiled form, in the *Methodist Service*

Book (1975) where the funeral liturgy includes this optional petition:

Father of all, we pray for those whom we love, but see no longer. Grant them your peace; let light perpetual shine upon them; and in your loving wisdom and almighty power work in them the good purpose of your perfect will; through Jesus Christ our Lord.³

The Western Catholic Tradition

What gave widespread impetus to this revival in the Church of England of praying for the Christian dead was the pastoral situation brought about by the massive slaughter on the Western Front during the First World War. On an hitherto unprecedented scale, Anglican clergy found themselves ministering to the families of young men killed in action or missing presumed killed. Usually several weeks had elapsed before families were informed. In this situation the theology of Martin Bucer could provide only cold comfort for grieving families. In the face of deep distress arising from an acute pastoral need, the immediate response of many clergy was to offer intercessory prayer on behalf of those killed in circumstances often known only to God.

Now if we look back to the ancient Church, we find that it was precisely such pastoral concern for the Christian dead that first gave rise to intercessory prayer on their behalf. The earliest clear example occurs in the mid-second century popular work, the *Acts of Paul and Thecla*, where Thecla prays that God will grant eternal life to the dead daughter of her hostess.⁴ Moreover, there is nothing to suggest that this was considered an innovation. The earliest references in the writings of the Fathers occur in the works of Tertullian (c. 160 - c.220) who takes the practice for granted.⁵ Cyprian was the first to link prayers for the departed with the mention of the dead person's name at the Eucharist.⁶ Then from the fourth century onwards prayer for the departed became a regular feature of funeral liturgies. Elsewhere, Augustine, in his *Confessions*, is moved to pray thus for the soul of his mother Monica:

Forgive, Lord, forgive, and enter not into judgement upon her. Let mercy be exalted above judgement because you are merciful and you have promised mercy to the merciful ... Let no one pluck her from your protection ... So let her rest in peace with the husband before whom and after whom she had no other.⁷

Later still, the Liturgy of St John Chrysostom offers a simple and general petition for the departed:

Remember too, all those who are fallen asleep in hope of the resurrection unto eternal life and give them rest where the light of thy countenance shineth.⁸

Interestingly, this text is still in use in Orthodox churches today. In fact, prayer for the departed remains universal in all the Eastern churches and, of course, in the Catholic Church, where the Requiem Mass provides the main liturgical setting. The Roman

Missal of 1970 includes three forms for use at funerals and three on anniversaries. Three more are offered for use on All Souls' Day (November 2nd) when the Church commemorates the souls of the faithful departed. Five more forms are offered for use on other occasions.

But while members of the Ecumenical Society of the Blessed Virgin Mary may be imagined as feeling disposed toward accepting Catholic doctrine without reservation, nevertheless we do well to present a sound case for prayer on behalf of the Christian dead. If we are to be entirely confident of Catholic doctrine, and in fairness to the Reformers, we must engage with the issues at stake. Moreover, it is important for Catholics at least to be aware of what Catholic doctrine regards as being appropriate forms of prayer for the departed. Therefore we shall consider two pressing questions: (1) Does Catholic doctrine run counter to Scripture concerning prayer for the departed? (2) What are we doing when we pray for those who have died in Christ? First, then, the connection between prayer for the departed and Scripture.

Scripture and Prayer for the Departed

To be sure, Martin Bucer makes an important point when he reminds us that Scripture nowhere contains an unambiguous reference to intercessory prayer on behalf of those who have died in Christ. At this point, of course, some may wish to cite the two biblical texts invariably used in support of prayer for the departed:

[Judas] also took up a collection, man by man, to the amount of two thousand drachmas of silver, and sent it to Jerusalem to provide for a sin offering. In doing this he acted very well and honourably, taking account of the resurrection. For if he were not expecting that those who had fallen would rise again, it would have been superfluous and foolish to pray for the dead. But if he was looking to the splendid reward that is laid up for those who fall asleep in godliness, it was a holy and pious thought. Therefore he made atonement for the dead, so that they might be delivered from their sin. (2 Maccabees 12:43-45, NRSV)

May the Lord grant mercy to the household of Onesiphorus, because he often refreshed me and was not ashamed of my chain; when he arrived in Rome, he eagerly searched for me and found me - may the Lord grant that he will find mercy from the Lord on that day! (2 Timothy 1:16-18a, NRSV)

The relevance of the second text is that Onesiphorus was already dead at the time the writer expressed hope that he would find mercy.

Unfortunately, however, setting aside Bucer's claim that the Maccabean reference belongs to an uncanonical work, exegesis of both texts is so problematic as to undermine attempts to base Christian doctrine upon that sole foundation. In this regard, a regrettable failing of the otherwise excellent *Catechism of the Catholic Church*⁹ is its unsophisticated use of such awkward proof texts. And this despite the recognized insights of Catholic biblical scholarship. Significantly, no less a figure than

Tertullian lists offerings for the dead, doubtless involving prayer, as being among those liturgical practices which are not contained in Scripture but which nevertheless are universally observed in the Church.¹⁰

The fundamental issue at stake, therefore, is that of *sola scriptura* (by scripture alone). A central principle of the Reformation, originating with Martin Luther, *sola scriptura* establishes Scripture as its own interpreter and sole source of authority for the Church. In stating this principle it was Luther's intention to safeguard Christian Faith from distortion through human accretions masquerading as revelation. For the Reformers, only that which is present in Scripture can be maintained as part of the authentic Faith. Hence Bucer's conclusion that, since the New Testament is silent on the subject, prayer for the Christian dead is to be eschewed.

The dust of controversy having long since settled, *sola scriptura* is no longer guaranteed to divide Catholic from Protestant, all Christians accepting the basic authority of Scripture. But while *sola scriptura* remains an important safeguard against unwarranted additions to Christian faith, it has the unfortunate effect of obscuring the development in doctrine that took place in the Patristic Church as the Fathers wrestled with the far-ranging consequences for Christian doctrine of the foundational affirmation of faith - Jesus is Lord. As any theology undergraduate knows, the doctrine of the Trinity settled upon at the Ecumenical Council of Chalcedon in 451 is nowhere explicitly contained in the New Testament. Contrary to Luther's intention, if followed rigorously *sola scriptura* would exclude even the doctrine of the Trinity from authentic Christian Faith.

What is called for, then, is the restatement of the *sola scriptura* principle to acknowledge the legitimacy of development in Christian doctrine, provided always that such development in no way contradicts Scripture, and remains congruent with other doctrines. At the same time, this would be consistent with what Vatican II refers to as the 'hierarchy of truths' in which certain doctrines hold a more significant place than others, according to their relation to the central doctrines of the Faith. This is not to say that some doctrines are less true than others, but that their truth follows as a consequence of the truth of those doctrines from which they have arisen. Given that there is a hierarchy of truths, and granted the possibility of development in Christian doctrine, Catholic teaching justifiably holds intercessory prayer for the Christian dead to be a sound elaboration of what is contained in Scripture. Specifically, in the fulness of the Catholic Faith, prayer for the departed arises as a consequence of the *communio sanctorum*, the communion of saints - a doctrine articulated in the Apostles' Creed and firmly based in Scripture.

While the phrase is not actually used in the New Testament, the concept of the *communio sanctorum* is evident in such passages as Colossians 1:12 which refers to our sharing in the inheritance of the saints in light. In essence, the communion of saints denotes the union between individual Christians and Christ, and so between each and every Christian. Elsewhere in the New Testament, most notably in the closing salutation of his second letter to the church at Corinth, Paul refers to the same reality as fellowship or *koinonia* in the Holy Spirit. As such, the communion of saints comprises not just the saints in heaven but the whole company of believers.

Accordingly, Catholic doctrine recognizes three distinct elements within the communion of saints: the Church triumphant in heaven; the Church militant on earth; and the Church expectant, which comprises those souls in a state of transition between the Church militant and the Church triumphant. From the solidarity of the baptized and the thinness of the veil that separates the quick and the dead, it is fair to conclude that death represents no decisive barrier to the fellowship of all the saints which naturally includes prayer.

How well Charles Wesley sums up this solidarity in Christ in a superb hymn written for his collection of funeral hymns (1759). Using as his central image John Bunyan's vision of the stream of death in *The Pilgrim's Progress*, Wesley draws on a wealth of biblical imagery to present a glorious picture of the *communio sanctorum*.

Come, let us join our friends above
That have obtained the prize,

And on the eagle wings of love

To joys celestial rise:

Let all the saints terrestrial sing

With those to glory gone;

For all the servants of our King,

In earth and heaven, are one.

One family we dwell in him,

One Church, above, beneath,

Though now divided by the stream,

The narrow stream of death:

One army of the living God,

To his command we bow;

Part of his host have crossed the flood,

And part is crossing now.

Ten thousand to their endless home

This solemn moment fly;

And we are to the margin come,

And we expect to die.¹¹

Sadly, however, a feature of the cultural individualism prevalent among twentieth-century Christians, Protestant and Catholic alike, has been a neglect of the communion of saints and our responsibility for the welfare of one another before God. If each of us stands before God as an isolated individual then nothing is to be gained from praying for the departed. Happily, though, there are signs that the People of God are beginning to rediscover their sense of corporate identity. A recent trend in ecumenical ecclesiology has been to recover the idea of the Church as *koinonia* in the Holy Spirit. It may be that renewed interest in the communion of saints as fellowship in the Holy Spirit will revitalize prayer for the departed.

The Coherence of Prayer for the Departed

Having considered how prayer for the departed relates to Scripture, we turn to our second question, which is principally one of coherence: what do we consider we are doing when we pray for those who have died in Christ? In 1971 the [Church of England] Archbishops' Commission on Christian Doctrine under the chairmanship of the then Bishop of Durham, Dr Ian Ramsey, produced a report entitled *Prayer and the Departed* which sets out the theological arguments for and against prayer for the Christian dead. It is not my intention here to rehearse what that admirable report has to say. Anyone interested in the detailed theological argument and the fascinating historical background to the topic will find in that document a wealth of information. And yet, the eminent members of the Archbishops' Commission can be criticized for their collective lack of imagination - a quality which Karl Barth declared to be vital for the task of theology. Our chief criticism of the report of the Archbishops' Commission is that theological arguments are set out in an abstract way which loses something of the existential dimension. Prayer for the departed is not primarily an exercise in speculative thought but rather one of the ways in which the Church looks after her members. As such, prayer for the Christian dead springs from within a groaning heart which, as Paul points out, can fall back upon the intercession of the Holy Spirit where words fail (Romans 8:26).

Even so, the chief argument advanced against prayer for the departed on the ground of coherence is that it is unnecessary and improper. Since this life is the time for making an irrevocable decision for or against God, no change of direction is possible after death. Insofar as it asks God to do something which God has already decided either to do or not to do, prayer for those who have died is ill-conceived. There again, where a person has clearly died in Christian faith, there is no need for us to pray that he or she may receive mercy and find rest and peace, for we are assured of that anyway. Indeed, to pray in such terms expresses doubt in God's promises and undermines the doctrine of Christian assurance.

Two things can be said in response. Firstly, as we have been careful to observe, Catholic doctrine refers only to prayer on behalf of the Christian dead - for the baptized who die in faith. Therefore any suggestion that in praying for the departed we are asking God to change his mind about the eternal fate of the soul is without foundation. Secondly, we reject the view that, by asking God to do something which Christian faith believes he will do anyway, we express doubt in his promises, as if God has to be cajoled into acting on his word. A significant proportion of Christian prayer involves our asking God to do what we believe a loving God will do anyway. Our prayers for peace in Bosnia, for instance, do not express uncertainty over God's disposition towards humankind, for we know that God wills peace in Bosnia. Rather, such prayers express our concern for the people of Bosnia and our participation in God's saving purposes. Similarly, that God has already promised mercy, rest and peace for the Christian dead offers no compelling reason why we should refrain from praying that they will indeed receive these things. Prayers for the Christian dead are an expression of our faith in God and our commitment to his plan for humankind. Hence Augustine's perceptive comment prefacing his prayer for the soul of Monica: 'I believe you have already done what I ask of you, but approve the

prayer my lips desire'.¹²

That said, there remains a further weighty argument against prayer for the departed, this time focusing on our lack of knowledge concerning the state of souls which, in their transition from this life to the next, comprise what we have already referred to as the Church expectant. Concerning this issue, Calvin issued a firm warning:

Now it is neither lawful nor expedient to inquire too curiously concerning our souls' intermediate state. Many torment themselves overmuch with disputing as to what place the souls occupy, and whether or not they already enjoy heavenly glory. Yet it is foolish and rash to inquire concerning unknown matters more deeply than God permits us to know.¹³

Since we know so little about the Church expectant, what possible meaning can be ascribed to prayer for the Christian dead? Moreover, prayer for the departed assumes a process of transition over a period of time during which it is meaningful to pray for souls, but the opposite appears to be indicated in Scripture. Witness the words of Jesus on the cross to the thief crucified alongside him: 'Today you will be with me in paradise'. (Luke 23:43)

Taking this last point first, whether or not it is proper to assume the transition of souls over a period of time is immaterial. The 'Today' spoken of on the cross refers to God's time and not ours, and God's time is his eternally present moment. As the Second Letter of Peter puts it, echoing the Psalmist, 'With the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day' (2 Peter 3:8). Accordingly, whether or not there is as instantaneous transition from Church militant to Church triumphant has never been settled in dogmatic theology.

With regard to Calvin's point concerning our lack of knowledge about *post mortem* existence, it is important to note that prayer for the Christian dead preceded particular theories regarding the state of their souls. Again, it is not the case that belief in purgatory gave rise to prayer for the Christian dead. On the contrary, the mediaeval doctrine of purgatory arose as a consequence of scholastic reflection upon the practice of prayer for the departed. Therefore we should not let difficulties over some of the more colourful representations of purgatory weigh against prayer for the Christian dead. While the Church expectant has traditionally found its shape in the doctrine of purgatory, Catholic doctrine on the subject - if not always popular Catholic piety - is suitably restrained and mindful of our distinct lack of knowledge in this area.

Altogether, we conclude that, concerning prayer for the departed, Catholic doctrine is coherent and meaningful and does not run counter to Scripture. With this observation we arrive at our last section which takes us beyond the speculative into the realm of personal existence.

Conceiving Prayer for the Departed

Bearing in mind Barth's advice to use our imagination in theology, how might we best describe what is involved in praying for those who have died in Christ? The nineteenth-century divine, Frederick William Faber, presents a colourful and imaginative picture:

Make a composition of place - flames sobbing on the shore of purgatory, like the chafing of the tide upon the rocks - awful dreary light of the far-stretching land of fire ... Of the souls who are in that land tonight, some have long been there ... Some are just arrived with all yet to go through. Some are just ready to come out. All know that they are saved ... but oh! the wearying lagging lapse of time, which seems so long. But we will take one soul - a London soul: he was poor, had difficulties in keeping the faith, fought for fifty years with this hard-hearted city, alas! not without sin - but had faith, sacraments, perhaps attendance at church, great devotion to mass anyhow - he is gone to purgatory - his hour is at hand: it is depending on our prayers, on the prayers of some one of us, on the ending of this octave, on the procession of this night. Oh how he yearns to see God!¹⁴

Full marks for creativity but not, I suggest, a picture that will strike a chord with many of us.

More promising perhaps is the picture presented by Fr Karl Rahner who sees the transition of the soul in the Church expectant as a process of growing in Christian maturity aided by the prayers of the Church militant.¹⁵ In this process of making whole, the basic decision for God made immutable at death gradually permeates the breadth of our being, so that the soul's essential love for God progressively invades the resistant areas of the self. Inevitably, integrating the whole self around that fundamental decision can be painful as the consequences of past sins are purged or cleansed away. In light of this description of the transition of the soul, prayer for the departed becomes a continuing expression of our natural concern for the spiritual welfare and growth of those who have been dear to us in life.

As Rahner reminds us, however, issues relating to how prayer for the departed actually works, together with its precise effects, have never been settled in dogmatic theology. At the same time, Catholic doctrine recognizes that some forms of prayer for the departed are more appropriate than others. As befits our lack of clarity concerning the Church expectant, prayer for the departed should not enter into detailed intercession and thus presume to know more than we can about that realm. Probably the most appropriate prayer for the Christian dead is a general intercession asking for that rest and peace in God's presence that is indicative of the beatific vision. Moreover, since prayer for the departed derives from our solidarity in Christ in the communion of saints, such prayer should always form part of an intercession that embraces the living within its scope. Likewise, if the intended recipients are named individuals, then this should not be to the neglect of the rest of those who have died in Christ. Above all, restraint and sensitivity are called for when praying for those who have died in Christ.

At the same time, we should be wary of categorizing the souls of the departed regarding their suitability as potential recipients for intercessory prayer. In particular, we should avoid the obvious conclusion that abject sinners and the weak are more in need of such prayer than those obviously fortified by their religion. On the contrary, the souls of those who in life might be thought worthy could be most in need of prayer. Indeed, might it not be that children, the poor, outcasts and the downtrodden are immediate recipients of the beatific vision? After all, the Song of the Blessed Virgin Mary proclaims a reversal in the expected order of things:

He has shown strength with his arm;
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.
He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,
and lifted up the lowly;
he has filled the hungry with good things,
and sent the rich away empty. (Luke 1:51-53)

To conclude, after whatever necessary sanctification has been completed there will take place our final homecoming into which Frederick Faber provides a characteristically colourful glimpse:

St Peter welcomes his child - St Michael takes him through astonishing ranks of saints and angels to our Lady's throne and leaves him there ... She is the Queen of that dear soul - she rises from her throne - presents the soul to Jesus - and He to the Eternal Father ... The new soul is set upon his throne and crowned by God with the crown which he won in the dark streets and dull traffic of London, but which his Heavenly Father had prepared for him before the world began.¹⁶

Amid all such imaginative speculation about our final entry into eternal life, prayer for the departed in the communion of saints bears witness to the ineffable mystery of the mercy of the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ who has said, 'I will have mercy upon whom I will have mercy'. (Exodus 33:19)

We end with an extract from a prayer by Lancelot Andrewes (1555-1625), sometime Bishop of Winchester. Concise and to the point, it is an exemplary model of intercessory prayer on behalf of those who have died in Christ:

Thou which art Lord at once of the living and of the dead;
Whose are we whom the present world yet holdeth in the flesh,
Whose are they withal whom, unclothed of the body, the world to come hath even now received:
give to the living mercy and grace,
to the dead rest and light perpetual;
give to the Church truth and peace,
to us sinners penitence and pardon.